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ALFRED BENISON ATHERTON

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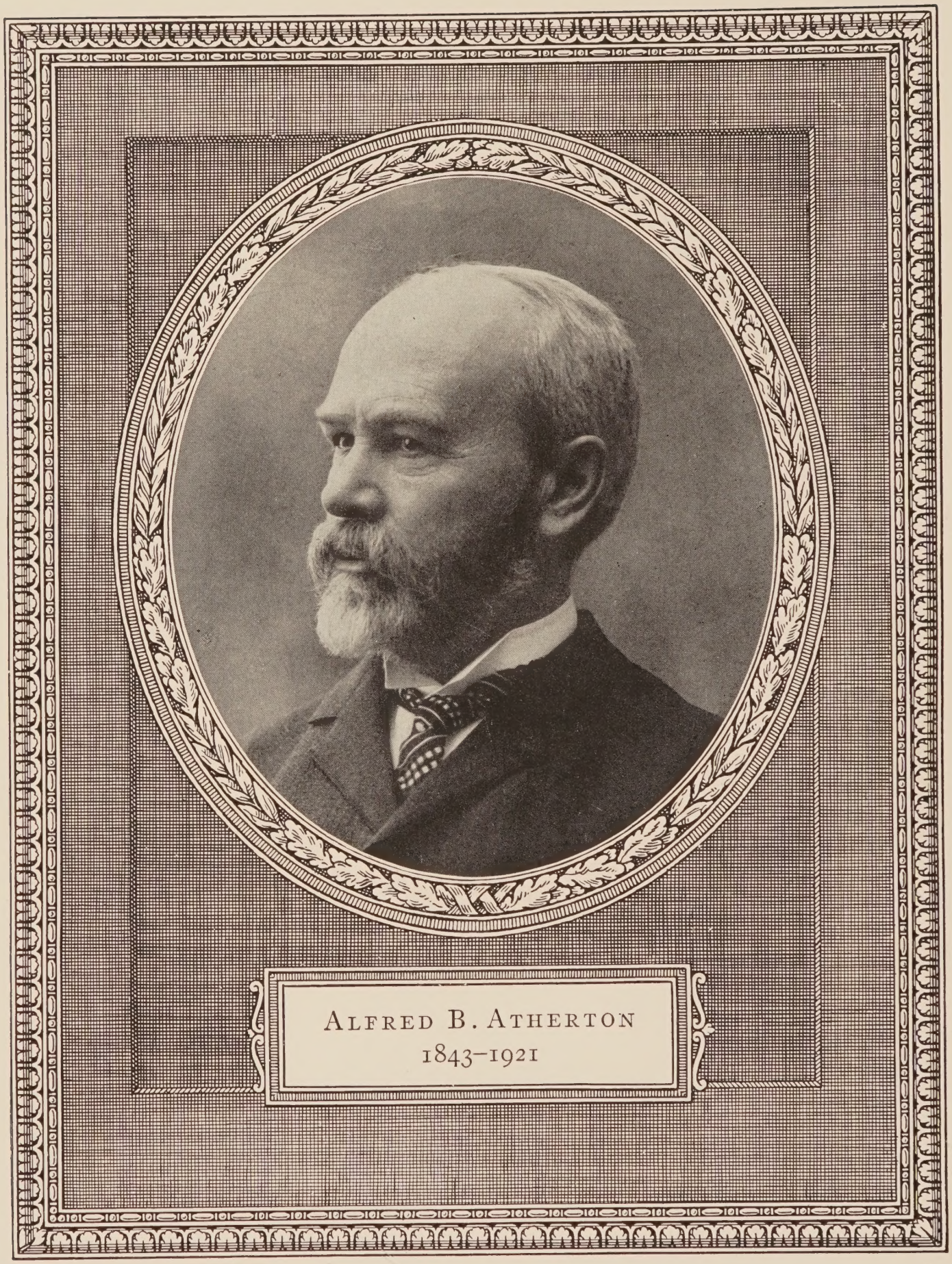

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1843–1921

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ALFRED BENISON ATHERTON, B.A. University of New Brunswick, 1862; M.D. Harvard, 1866; L.R.C.P. & S. Edinburgh, 1868; LL.D. University of New Brunswick, 1900; a charter member of the American College of Surgeons; was born at Queensbury, York County, New Brunswick, January 22, 1843; son of John and Charlotte Perley Atherton, of Puritan stock, who migrated from New England about 1760. On his return from Europe where he had gone for post-graduate study, he began his practice in Fredericton but a few miles from his birthplace. Here he evidenced unusual proficiency in surgery.

In 1884 he sought larger fields for his usefulness and removed to Toronto where he became attached to the teaching staff of the Women's Medical College, his subject being "The Principles of Surgery." He was appointed surgeon to St. John's Hospital for Women of Toronto. He returned to Fredericton in 1898 and was appointed to the Surgical Division of the Victoria Public Hospital.

Doctor Atherton was a man of pronounced aggressiveness and vigor, rather inflexible in his views, with brusque mannerisms which to his friends were characteristic, but among those who knew him not, or slightly, militated against him.

Doctor Atherton was house surgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital after graduation, and was contemporaneous with many Harvard men who in no small degree contributed to the progress of American surgery. It was Dr. Atherton's custom to visit either European or American hospitals annually. Thus he kept in personal touch with the leaders in the surgical world. In fact, at any clinic or hospital in America where it has been my privilege to visit, especially at Baltimore, Chicago, New York, Boston, Minnesota University, or the Mayo Clinic, I always encounter some one who knew Dr. Atherton. Often when asked what my home town was, the mention of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, would be followed by: "That's where Atherton hails from." I recall very well in 1905 when I called on the beloved William Osler at his home in Baltimore, just before his removal from Johns Hopkins University to Oxford, England, that he invited me into his library, and after showing me a few of his most prized volumes, and having interested me in their history he suddenly stopped and asked "How's Atherton? Does he do much fishing now?" Not a little of our time was spent in discussing Dr. Atherton, whom Sir William Osler held in high regard.

Our first meeting occurred in 1897 when I wired him as follows: "Come prepared to operate for extra-uterine pregnancy." He arrived by next train, a distance of 40 miles, and received me with a hearty hand shake and genial smile, at the same time remarking: "That was a rather peremptory telegram, and I am here as directed." My preconception of Dr. Atherton was entirely reversed. I fancied that he was a man of large physique, clean shaven, and very serious. The man I met, however, was of short stature, about five foot six, wearing a carefully kept grey Van Dyke beard, of marked physical activity, most affable, with a massive forehead and penetrating expression. We operated at the patient's home, utilizing the "kitchen table." She made an uninterrupted recovery, still enjoys good health, and since then it has been my privilege to attend her at several normal births. In those days the marine sponge was an essential in surgical equipment, and I well recall the little bag of them he had and the vigorous means he used to evacuate the clots, etc.

Nowadays, a surgeon who observed the technique employed then would be considered guilty of gross technical error. Nevertheless, one recalls the many instances of smooth, uninterrupted recovery resulting when Lawson Tait's simple surgical cleanliness held sway; and it is rather hard to understand how one ever got such good results from operations done in the country under most unfavorable environment, especially in cases of compound fracture, gall stones, appendicitis, tracheotomy, emergency gynecological operations, etc. Prior to that time I had never practiced in country districts and this experience with an abdominal section at the hands of Dr. Atherton made a lasting impression upon me. In this section of the country, we have produced many good surgeons, but there can be no doubt that Dr. Atherton was the pioneer par excellence, and that the rest of us received our impetus very largely through the example set by this gentleman.

Dr. Atherton figured among the first of a group of surgeons to have operated successfully for acute perforated gastric ulcer, being so mentioned in Denis's *System of Surgery*, issue of 1895, his name appearing in this connection with Kreige, Morse, Maclearn, Michaux, Rioux, Nicholson, Bennett, Schuchardt, and Kuester. It was the writer's fortune to have been associated with him in some of this work.

In common with all who have attempted extensive surgery, he has been criticized for overdoing the subject, and early in his career he became involved in a lawsuit for malpractice, wherein a man's arm was sacrificed in an attempt forcibly to reduce an old dislocated shoulder, wherein the axillary artery was atheromatous and ruptured under manipulation. The trial in this case resulted in a division in the profession in New Brunswick generally, but in Fredericton in particular, as many of the leading men in both the profession of law and medicine were summoned as witnesses, also men were brought from Montreal, Boston, and elsewhere. Thus a schism was born which lasted for many years and in fact died only with the Doctor's removal from here. There seems to have been no doubt that this unfortunate experience could very well have been avoided, especially as the patient

was that of another practitioner, who called at the Doctor's office for an opinion and not for an operation. The incident distressed him keenly, I feel quite sure, for in conversation he frequently referred to some phase of it.

Before his removal to Tortonto he taught a Sunday School Class in the Fredericton Methodist Church. This he continued to do for 10 years, and many men who were his pupils still speak of the impression made on their minds through him. He was a man of exemplary habits, not given to any but the simplest forms of amusement, notably fishing and curling. The latter sport he took up at the advanced age of 65 years, becoming probably one of the most ardent curlers known. It was a standing joke that when some one telephoned for Dr. Atherton when he was engaged in the game, he was always "too busy for an hour or more" to attend unless it was a case of extreme importance. He was very fond of children and often expressed disappointment that he and his wife had been deprived of them. His wife was a Miss Wiley, a native of Fredericton.

In politics he was an ardent Liberal, and a great admirer of the then Premier, Sir Wilfrid Laurier. In fact, he was persuaded in 1911 to accept nomination for the Federal House, and was making splendid progress in his canvass when he made a psychological misadventure of the worst kind for himself and the best for his opponent. It was during the election for Reciprocity with the United States. Senator Champ Clark in a speech in Congress at Washington was quoted as having threatened the annexation of Canada by the United States. While Dr. Atherton was making an address before a body of electors, he was interrupted by a heckler, who shouted: "What about annexation and the Stars and Stripes?" To which he in his impulsive manner replied: "What's wrong with the American Flag? I'd as soon live under it as any other." This undoubtedly contributed largely to his defeat, for at that time Champ Clark with his propaganda was heartily abhorred by the loyal Canadian; nothing more offensive could possibly have occurred to raise the passions of the voter and to have incited action in behalf of his opponent (which gentleman won out by a large majority).

In his day the automobile was not much in use here, and no one outstripped Dr. Atherton in his turnouts. He was a great lover of horses, and drove a span well mated and with lots of style. He would not tolerate a poor horse. To see him in his winter turnout was quite a picture, with flowing fur robes, beaver fur coat, black peaked fur cap, grey beard, heavy fur mits, and beautifully harnessed animals.

Dr. Atherton was one of the pioneers in surgery, having done some very advanced work. He attained quite a reputation throughout Canada and the United States. When he left Fredericton for California a group of us tendered him a dinner and presented him with a memento of our regard for him which visibly affected him. It was apparent then that he had about reached his limit physically. He lived in San Diego, California, from 1916 to the time of his death in 1921, at the age of 78 years, when he suffered a cerebral hæmorrhage. W. H. IRVINE.

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